

# THE SITUATION OF COMMUNITY LIBRARIES IN MALI

Mamadou Keita



Mamadou Keita at his office in the National Library, January 2006. Photo M.B

Mamadou Konoba Keita is the Head of the Libraries and Documentation centres department of Mali, and President of the Malian Librarians Association. He made this presentation in Bamako, 28 January, 2006, during the workshop on the role of the libraries in the World Social Forum.

I shall begin my comment by saying that books have always been at the heart of the main programs set up by the successive governments of Mali. Over the years, various policies have been adopted, promoting culture in general and literacy in particular. One of the most important of these policies is doubtless the one that we find in the preamble of the February 1992 Constitution which states: « The sovereign people of Mali proclaims its determination to defend the cultural and linguistic diversity of the national community and commits itself to the improvement of the quality of life, the protection of the environment and the strengthening of its cultural heritage. »

The same Constitution declares (article 8): « Freedom of artistic and cultural creation is recognized and guaranteed. Its expression is regulated under conditions defined by law. »

In this framework of laws and decrees, the State has initiated a program to encourage literacy through the creation of structures and projects that aim to put the book and reading at the heart of the national interest. In 1982 it created the National council for the promotion of books in Mali, an advisory organization made up of representatives of the ministry of culture as well as institutional and professional partners.

Even earlier, on September 22nd, 1960, the government set up the publishing

house "Editions du Mali", as well as The People's Bookstore of Mali (Librairie Populaire du Mali) and the National Pedagogical Institute, all devoted to promoting reading and literature. While the last of these three institutions still exists under a new name (National Center for Education), the first two have been disbanded and privatized.

Private initiatives have also emerged on the ground left vacant by the State: the Jamana cooperative in 1897, or the Mali Writers Union in the same period.

Thanks to the events of March 1991, other initiatives followed. We witnessed the creation of REMADOC, a network of librarians for development, OMEL, the Malian organization of book publishers, AMLP, the Malian association of professional bookshops, the JSS, "Jeune Société du Savoir", a network of science clubs as well as ALED, the association for the promotion of reading, education and development.

Nevertheless, the State remained very active in the sector of books and reading. In 1977, it set up the Operation public reading (Opération Lectures publiques) with the aim to implement public libraries in each district of Mali, each structure housing many thousands of books and being used as a permanent cultural centre, as well as a venue for training, information and leisure for young people and civil servants or retirees. The government also set up PRODEC, a ten-year education plan that envisions each school building as housing not only classrooms, but also systematically a library.

2000 was a historic year with the creation, for the first time in Mali, of a Ministry of Culture. Its missions, among others, are the development of national artistic expressions and cultural works. The same year saw the signature of AFLAM (Appui à la Filière du livre au Mali) a French-Malian agreement in support of the booksellers and libraries network in Mali. It also saw the creation of the network of School Libraries (Cellule des bibliothèques scolaires) which is still in the making.

The year 2001 saw the creation of the National Office of Public Libraries and Documentation centres and its subsidiary, the National Centre for Public Reading.

All these initiatives underline the will of the government to put books and reading at the centre of its policies. The government officials know that « a nation of readers is a nation of winners ».

But all these measures can only have the expected result if the amount of children going to school reaches a certain level and when we will have further pushed back illiteracy, allowing a majority of citizens who are beyond school age to learn how to read and write.

In Mali we distinguish between :

- Public access libraries : they are either publicly or privately funded.

\*Publicly funded libraries are coordinated by the National Centre for Public Reading which takes care of management and technical follow-up. There are over

a hundred of them.

- 46 district libraries;
  - 1 rural community library;
  - 7 national language libraries;
  - 6 public libraries in Bamako;
  - 6 reading and children's activity centres in Bamako;
  - 1 reference library in Bamako;
  - 1 children's library in Bamako;
  - 11 book deposits in rural areas bordering the railroad between Bamako and the train yard at the border with the republic of Senegal,
- There are 88 of this type of libraries in total.

\*42 libraries have been identified as being managed by citizen's groups.

- 70 school and university libraries: 9 in higher education; 38 in general secondary education; 11 in technical and professional colleges, 12 in general education.
- 380 public libraries have been identified at the level of primary education.

These statistics do not take into account the private schools, the number of which is difficult to determine exactly at this stage.

- Documentation centres : 43 have been identified within national directions as well as specific private or public organizations.

- There are also a number of family libraries, holding Islamic manuscripts in areas of predominantly Muslim faith like Timbuktu, Gao, Djenné, Dia, Mopti...

- Personal libraries of retired former higher public servants;

- Libraries of foreign cultural centres : French, American, Iranian, Libyan ...

**Translated from the French by Moise Dembele**